DRAWING ON PAPER , PROBABLY YANKTON SIOUX, CA. 1881

Description:
Drawing in pencil and colored pencil on paper of incidents transpiring in January 1881 involving Teton Sioux, Yankton Sioux, soldiers of the United States Army and civilians employed by the U.S. government

Height 39.75 inches 101 cm
Width 35.75 inches 90.7 cm

Provenance:
Lessard Collection – SD 982
Epic Fine Arts Co./Masco Corp.

This drawing on paper, likely made around 1881 by an anonymous Plains Indian warrior-artist, presents us with clearly delineated graphic renderings of events that transpired along the Missouri River in northeastern Montana on January 2 and 3, 1881. The participants depicted include United States Army personnel, civilians employed by the U.S. government, the Indian inhabitants of one tipi village under attack, and another camp circle whose warriors seek to avoid a similar fate.

The artistic style in this drawing is consistent with the biographical art tradition adhered to by warrior-artists during the Plains Indian Wars of the 1860s and 1870s and the early reservation period. This style differs significantly from the conventions of contemporaneous mainstream Western representational art. Some of its notable characteristics displayed here include: a flattening of perspective and no attempt to create the illusion of three-dimensionality; use of a bird's eye view for taking in objects spread out across the field of action, e.g. the tipi villages; an absence of portraiture in the sense of attempting to fashion a realistic depiction of an individual; no attempt to convey a sense of photographic realism; and partial figures used in a kind of shorthand to

represent entire entities, e.g. horse's heads signifying the animals' presence.

This is an exceptionally large drawing for a Plains Indian work on paper from this period. The composition is complex, involving a large cast of characters assuming roles in a series of discrete, albeit related, events. The inclusion of even minimal geographical features, in this instance northeastern Montana's Poplar Creek and the Missouri and Redwater River, is rare in late-19th century Plains Indian biographical art.[1]

The artist deftly created a lively presentation featuring three vignettes, linked episdoes which begin in the lower left-hand corner of the sheet, continue left-to-right across the top, and terminate at the lower right. All relate to attempts by the government to bring about the surrender of Lakotas, also known as Tetons or Western Sioux,[2] who by the mid-19th century ranged west of the Missouri River in North and South Dakota and into Montana, Wyoming, and Nebraska.

The Lakotas' resistance to the U.S. government's demands that they capitulate, abandon their way of life, and accustom themselves to confinement on reservations reached a crescendo in June 1876. Coalescing around the leadership provided by such figures as Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse, many Lakotas joined their Cheyenne allies in shocking the nation by handing its forces a pair of stinging setbacks in Montana. On June 17 they decisively defeated General George Crook's force at the Battle of the Rosebud. Nine days later, they tore apart Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer's 7th U.S. Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Bighorn

These stunning victories established the high water mark of Lakota resistance. Determined to avenge that summer's humiliations, the army responded with a winter campaign so broad in scope, relentless in execution, and devastating in effect that by the

spring of 1877 even Lakota diehards realized they faced but two choices. They could adopt Crazy Horse's example, surrender, and take up reservation life _ a dubious course, given the fact that within four months Crazy Horse himself lay dead, felled by a bayonet-wielding soldier _ or follow Sitting Bull's example and escape northward across the Medicine Line separating the United States and Canada.

But Canadian exile held only an illusory promise and provided no more than a stopgap solution. By the winter of 1880-1881 Sitting Bull and his allies found their position growing increasingly precarious, as buffalo herds teetered on the brink of extinction and Canadian authorities eager to avoid a diplomatic imbroglio with the U.S. pressured them to reach an accommodation with the Americans. Accordingly, groups of Sitting Bull's followers began moving south, some keen on leaving Canada and taking any deal the government offered, others to test the waters and ascertain what sort of reception awaited them.

It is at this point that the story preserved by the warrior-artist who made this drawing comes into play.

In October 1880 the army established Camp Poplar River slightly more than a hundred miles below the Canadian border in northeastern Montana on the southern bank of the river for which it was named. Situated a couple of miles north of the Missouri River, the outpost lay about one-half mile north of Poplar River Agency, on what is now the Fort Peck Reservation, home for many Yankton Sioux. A distinct group composed of the Yankton and Yanktonai, the Yankton Sioux enjoyed close cultural, linguistic, and familial ties with the Lakotas.

Camp Poplar River served as an observation, contact, and interception point in the

government's efforts to persuade hostile Lakotas to swap their Canadian exile for reservation life. Its garrison grew during the winter of 1880-1881 and by January 1881 the roster of troops stationed there included elements of the Fifth, Seventh, and Eleventh Infantry, and the Seventh Cavalry.

The troops nervously eyed a nearby village of Hunkpapas, members of one of the seven Teton tribes, with suspicion.[3] This village of Sitting Bull's followers and erstwhile allies started materializing in late November 1880 as a refuge for recent arrivals from Canada. Within a couple of weeks what started as a camp of less than forty lodges grew in to a village twice that size. This is the assemblage of tipis the artist shows in the lower left-hand portion of his drawing.

December witnessed back-and-forth discussions between officers at Camp Poplar River and several Hunkpapa chiefs, including Gall, Crow King, Crow, and Low Dog. Unaccustomed to bowing to the wishes of anyone other than themselves and unwilling to start doing so, these headmen met repeated demands to surrender with ambiguous replies interpreted as delaying tactics by the soldiers.

The Hunkpapas appeared to be playing for time, putting off a decision to surrender in what seemed to some observers as nothing more than a maddening game without end. It was with this thought in mind that Major Guido Ilges[4] set out for the village from Camp Poplar River on the morning of January 2 with a mounted command consisting of troops from the Fifth and Seventh Infantry and Seventh Cavalry, his chief scout and interpreter, six Indian scouts from Fort Keogh, ten agency Indian police, a trio of Yanktonais volunteers, one citizen volunteer, and a horse-drawn Hotchkiss gun.

Reaching the timber beside the village, Ilges's' force linked up with another

detachment of fifty-eight soldiers from the Seventh and Eleventh Infantry armed with a three-inch Rodman gun, who marched there from the nearby agency under the command of Captain Ogden B. Read.[5]

At the lower left-hand side of the drawing is a tipi village with two white men wearing broad brimmed hats men positioned near a tipi on the right. The man holding the rifle is Joe Culbertson, chief scout and interpreter at Camp Poplar River and son of famed Upper Missouri River fur trader Alexander Culbertson and his wife Natawista (Medicine Snake Woman), who belonged to the Blood tribe of Blackfoot Indians.[6] Beside Culbertson stands Major Ilges.[7] Interestingly, the artist chose to depict Ilges wearing a chief's eagle feathers and carrying a three-bladed knife club.

Immediately to the left of Culbertson the artist has drawn a man with a bullet wound in his arm. The lack of long hair on this man is often seen in Plains Indian art from this period as an indication that he has been scalped, and if not literally scalped then dead. A woman lies prone inside the nearby tipi, a bullet wound in her chest. According to Culbertson, "A captain of the 5th Infantry fired at a friendly Indian by the name of Iron Bear, wounding him twice, and then shot into a teepee, killing Iron Bear's wife."[8]

Ilges reported that the engagement which ensued resulted in the surrender of 305 villagers and the killing of eight others, the capture of some 200 horses, 69 guns, and the destruction of 60 lodges by burning.[9] Within a few days the prisoners marched under guard to Fort Buford at the confluence of Missouri and Yellowstone Rivers in North Dakota and entered reservation life.

In the drawing's second episode the artist shows soldiers arrayed above the Hunkpapa village, their ranks stretching to the top left-hand side of the composition. A

quartet of white men stands in front of the assembled troops. These principal actors are, from left to right: Major Ilges; an unidentified individual who may be Joseph Culberson; interpreter Philip Alvarez, and Fort Peck agent Nathan S. Porter, who bears the military title "Major" customarily accorded civilians in his position.

This scene runs rightward across the top of the page where it embraces a large number of Indian warriors, one of whom shakes hands with Agent Porter. This is the prominent Yanktonai chieftain known as Skin of the Heart. A member of the Cuthead band, Skin of the Heart served as one of his tribe's delegates during discussions with the government in Washington, D.C. in 1872. His name refers to the buffalo's pericardium, the sack surrounding the heart that Yanktonais used for holding water _ especially that consumed by war parties _ and as containers for the porcupine quills women relied on for embellishing clothing and other items.

Here, the artist encapsulates events that transpired the day after Ilges's and Read's forces captured the Hunkpapa village. Flushed with victory, Ilges marched out of Camp Poplar River on January 3 determined to corral Hunkpapas he believed eluded his round-up by escaping to a Yanktonai village fifteen miles away on Redwater River. His command included the agent Porter, a battalion of Fifth Infantry and a company of the Seventh Cavalry, with field guns in tow. Halfway to his destination Ilges's force encountered the Yanktonai chiefs Skin of the Heart and Medicine Bear at the head of a group of warriors

Hoping to avoid the Hunkapapas fate, the Yanktonais beseeched Porter and Ilges to turn back, promising they would bring the missing Hunkapaps to Camp Poplar River the following day. Porter helped persuade Ilges to accept the offer, a promise which, the

major reported, "they carried out to a greater extent than I had any reason to expect."[10]

The artist placed the Yanktonais village in which the Hunkpapas sought refuge at the bottom right-hand portion of the drawing. He clearly delineates this village's "horns," formed as a result of the entry gap at the top of the camp circle, and highlights its yellow-painted council tipi. The white visitors to this village include agent Porter and his interpreter riding in what appears to be a horse-drawn cariole,[11] as well as an unidentified figure who stands beside the council lodge dressed in a long coat and broad brimmed hat wielding a horsewhip and what appears to be either a meat cleaver or traditional offering flag.

By way of summary, the composition details the January 2-3, 1881 run of events from the soldiers' assault on the Hunkpapa camp, to the successful effort by Skin of the Heart and his warriors to prevent troops from marching on their own village, and the government's agent visiting his charges.

Three mysteries still surround this drawing. Who made it? When was it made? And who wrote the English language names and descriptions associated with some of the images?

Among Plains Indians biographical art such as this was the domain of men. It was they who applied depictions of their war exploits to buffalo robes and, later, the paper pages they obtained through raid, trade, or gift. So we know the artist was a man.

Although this drawing could have been made by one of the Hunkpapas involved in the events depicted, their recollections of these events understandably features a Hunkpapa-centered focus. "Soldiers fired into Sioux and captured Indians," the written version of the pictographic winter count history of the Hunkpapa Long Soldier reads for

the year 1880-1881, specifying, “Infantry, artillery and cavalry.” Long Soldier’s drawing commemorating that event shows a pair of cannon firing from the left at two tipis, rifle shots to the right, a trio of horseshoes along the bottom, and a confusion of scattered tracks. The pictographic histories of the Hunkpapa warrior-historians Old Bull and Swift Dog also mention this occurrence, with the phrases “Gall’s Lodge” and “Gall they shoot into him.”[12]

Given the individual anonymity afforded the Hunkpapas in this drawing, especially when contrasted with the visual prominence accorded the soldiers as well and the Yanktonai warriors _ with some specifically identified _ a link between this collection of images and an unknown Yankton or Yanktonai artist seems more likely.

The date of the creation of these tableaux is uncertain, though it clearly cannot antedate the events it depicts. The artist worked in a style consistent with drawings made by warrior-artists active during the Plains Indian Wars and early reservation era. He also exhibits familiarity with the people and events that served as his subjects. It seems reasonable to embrace the notion the drawing was made, perhaps as a commission, reasonably soon after the events of January 1881 transpired.

The handwritten notations in English that place the scenes geographically, identify the villages, and provide identities to some individuals could have been made by an Indian, either the artist or someone else. More likely, however, they are the work of a non-Indian, possibly the individual who purchased (and perhaps commissioned) the work or to whom it was given as a memento of shared experience.

Ron McCoy, Ph.D.

[1] For other examples blending of the conventions of Plains Indian biographical picture-writing with cartography see Glen Fredlund, Linea Sundstrom and Rebecca Armstrong, "Crazy Mule's Maps of the upper Missouri, 1877-1880" *Plains Anthropologist*, Vol. 41, No.155 (1996), pp.5-27; Linea Sundstrom and Glen Fredlund, "The Crazy Mule Maps: A Northern Cheyenne's View of Montana and Western Dakota in 1878," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Spring, 1999), pp. 46-57. For a buffalo culture warrior's works done between 1889-1903 in which some geographic features appear see Father Peter J. Powell, "Sacrificed Transformed into Victory: Standing Bear Portrays Sitting Bull's Sun dance an the Final Summer of Lakota Freedom," in Evan M. Maurer, *Visions of the People: A Pictorial History of Plains Indian Life* (Minneapolis: The Mineeaplois Insitute of Arts, 1992), pp. 81-106.

[2] The tribes known collectively as the "Sioux" are divided into three groups. Around the mid-19th century the Santee, or Eastern Sioux, occupied southern Minnesota; the seven Teton, or Lakota, tribes ranged west of the Missouri River in North and South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, and Nebraska; while the Yankton, a division consisting of the Yankton and Yanktonai resided between extreme western Minnesota and the Missouri River in North and South Dakota.

[3] This village and the other congregations of tipi settlements that occupied the attention of troops at Camp Poplar River are often described as Hunkpapa camps. While prominent in mounting resistance to the government, the ranks of those the government considered "hostiles" included members of other Lakota tribes such as the Minneconjou, Sans Arc, Blackfeet, and Two Kettles of the north and the Oglala and Brule of the south. The degree to which kinship ties created an intricate network throughout Lakota society _ extending, as well to the Yanktons and such allied tribes as the Cheyennes and Arapahos _ is often underestimated.

[4] A Civil War veteran who received a brevet majority for gallant service during the Battle of the Wilderness in 1864, Ilges received promotion to the rank of lieutenant colonel in 1882. Francis B. Hietman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, From Its Organization, September 29, 1789, to September 29, 1889* (Washington, D.C.: The National Tribune, 1890), p. 363. In 1883, Ilges's court-martial for duplicating pay accounts resulted in his dismissal from the army. "Recent Courts-Martial Sentences," *The New York Times*, October 13, 1883.

[5] Ogden B. Read's collection of Plains Indian material culture artifacts, many of Hunkpapa and Yanktonai origin and most acquired between 1879-1882 _ some from the Hunkpapa village attacked on January 2, 1882 _ serves as the subject for Raymond J. DeMallie and Royal B. Hassrick, *Vestiges of a Proud Nation: The Ogden B. Read*

Northern Plains Indian Collection (Burlington, VT: Robert Hull Fleming Museum, 1986).

[6] For the colorful story of Joseph Culbertson's parents see Lesley Wischmann, *Frontier Diplomats: Alexander Culbertson and Natoyist-Siksina Among the Blackfeet* (Norman: The *Early Days* (Wolf Point, MT: Frank Delger, 1958).University of Oklahoma Press, 2004). Numerous fascinating details about Joseph Culbertson's life are preserved in Joseph Culbertson, *Joseph Culbertson: Famous Indian Scout Who Served Under General Miles In 1876-1895, True Stories of Camp Life in the Early Days* (Wolf Point, MT: Frank Delger, 1958).

7 The handwritten notation beside the figure of Ilges gives his rank as colonel, although at this point in his career he was a major. In 1864, during the Civil War, Ilges received a brevet rank as a lieutenant colonel. Although not officially sanctioned by the 1880s, it was by no means rare for officers to be referred to by their brevet ranks.

[8] Joseph Culbertson, p. 21

[9] The estimates of casualties and other figures are in *Annual Report of the Secretary of War for the Year 1881*, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1881), p. 91, which also contains Ilges's' report, pp. 101-105.

[10] Ilges, p. 104.

[11] A cariole (sometimes rendered "cariole") is a small, horse- or dog-drawn vehicle with or without wheels. For a circa 1824 drawing by Peter Rindisbacher of a cariole see Judith Hudson Beattie, "Glimpses of Manitoba's Past Through Three Undelivered Letters," *Manitoba History*, No. 41 (Spring/Summer 2001), *The Manitoba Historical Society,* http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/mb_history/41/undeliveredletters.shtml (accessed March 11, 2010). Identifying this mode of transportation as possibly a cariole, perhaps a sleigh, may seem a bit of a stretch but for four factors: the degree of detail used by the artist that imbues his drawing with a quality of verisimilitude, e.g. the officers' shoulder straps; the fact that numerous Plains Indian warrior-artists proved themselves perfectly capable of drawing wheels on wagons while this man chose not to put wheels on the vehicle; the fact that the winter of 1880-1881 was so harsh it not only served as the benchmark for meteorological misery for many years to come but made wheeled transport unusually difficult; and the documented presence of horse-drawn carioles, sleighs, and sledges in a region where Indians, white Americans, and Canadian Metis made whatever adjustments required of them to meet the vicissitudes of an unpredictable climate.

[12] The South Dakota State Historical Society has a copy of the Long Soldier winter count (cat. 69 X. 162) as does the National Museum of the American Indian (cat. 11/6720). Old Bull's winter count is in the Walter Stanley Campbell Collection at the University of Oklahoma's Western History Collections. Copies of Swift Dog's winter count can be found at the Cranbrook Institute of Science (cat. 4145) and the North Dakota State Historical Society (cat. E 459 and E 564).